

TUB VALVE HAVING VERSATILE MOUNTING STRUCTURE**REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS**

- [1] This application claims the priority of U.S. Provisional Appln. No. 60/416,178, filed October 4, 2002, the disclosure of which is incorporated herein by reference in its entirety.

TECHNICAL FIELD

- [2] The present invention is directed toward valves and valve mounting structures mounting structures, and more particularly to a valve mounting structure that has an adjustment mechanism accessible from a top portion of the valve.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

- [3] Many new bathrooms feature tubs that are separate from a shower enclosure. These tubs may have deck-mounted tub faucets instead of conventional wall-mounted faucets. Deck-mounted faucets often are mounted on a horizontal ledge around the perimeter of the tub. This ledge may be formed integrally with the tub or built up out of ceramic tile or stone.

- [4] Standard valves used in deck-mounted tubs often are threaded around its outside diameter and can be tightened by two nuts attached to the valve, one above the deck and one below the deck. Because deck-mounted structures usually enclose the valve completely with tile or other material, the underside of the valve is inaccessible after the valve is installed. If the valve loosens due to, for example, extended use or inadequate tightening, the valve needs to be tightened both above and below the deck to remedy the problem. Because the valve is enclosed in the deck, valve tightening may involve breaking out portions of the deck and/or maneuver tools underneath the tub to reach the underside of the valve, assuming that the underside of the valve is even accessible at all.

- [5] The structure of the decks themselves poses additional problems. A conventional installation would involve threading the valve through holes in a tub ledge integrally formed with the tub. A customized installation, however, involves mounting the valve to plywood decking and then building up ceramic tile and any associated underlayment around the valve. Integral tub ledges are normally thinner than custom-formed ledges, and therefore different valve assemblies are available to accommodate these two mounting systems. Further, because

customized installations may have variable thicknesses, the valve for a customized installation must be adjusted and tightened after the tile has been laid even though the underside of the valve is inaccessible after tile installation.

[6] Attempts to remedy this problem include designing special tools, such as a threaded sleeve, that can be slipped down the deck around the valve to pull a plate, nut, or other structure upward and therefore allow valve adjustments from above the deck. These structures, however, have limited contact area between the sleeve and the structure being adjusted to tighten the valve, making it difficult to generate enough frictional force to tighten the valve with sufficient clamping force. As a result, currently known structures may still allow the valve to remain somewhat loose. Further, currently known structures require specialized tools to tighten the valve, making valve adjustment inconvenient at best and impossible for workers who do not possess the specialized tools.

[7] There is a desire for a valve assembly for deck-mounted tubs that can be easily tightened from above the deck without requiring specialized tools. There is also a desire for a valve assembly that can be effectively installed in both conventional and customized installations.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[8] The present invention is directed to a valve assembly that can be adjusted and tightened completely above a deck surface. The assembly includes a valve body, a top plate that engages with the valve body, a bottom plate, and an adjustment member that bears against the valve body and engaged with the bottom plate to move the top and bottom plates relative to one another. If the top plate is fixed to the top surface of the deck, tightening the adjustment member causes the bottom plate to move upward toward the top plate until it contacts the bottom surface of the deck. If the bottom plate is fixed, however, tightening the adjustment member will push the top plate and the valve body downward until the top plate contacts the top surface of the deck. In each case, the relative movement between the top plate, the bottom plate, and the valve body is the same in response to the turning of the adjustment member.

[9] In one embodiment, the adjustment member is a jack screw or other threaded member that can be adjusted with a conventional screwdriver. This eliminates the need for specialized tools or direct access to the bottom plate.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[10] Figure 1 is a perspective view of a valve mounting structure according to one embodiment of the invention;

[11] Figure 2 is a perspective view of the mounting structure shown in Figure 1 in a conventional installation;

[12] Figure 3 is a perspective view of the mounting structure shown in Figure 1 in a customized installation;

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE EMBODIMENTS

[13] Figure 1 illustrates a valve assembly 100 according to one embodiment of the invention. The inventive valve mounting structure includes an adjustment member 102, such as a jack screw, attached to a top plate 104 and a bottom plate 106. In one embodiment, the adjustment member 102 is threaded, but the member 102 may have any structure that can engage and move the bottom plate 106. The adjustment member 102 does not need to be threaded along its entire length; instead, a threaded portion (not shown) can extend partially along the adjustment member 102 over a desired range corresponding to an anticipated range of deck thicknesses in which the valve assembly 100 may be installed. The adjustment member 102 has a tool mating surface 107 at its top portion. The tool mating surface 107 is shaped to accommodate any conventional tool, such as a screwdriver, Allen wrench, etc.

[14] In one embodiment, the adjustment member 102 bears against a surface of the valve body 108. Threads (not shown) in the bottom plate 106 engage with the threaded portion of the adjustment member 102 such that when the adjustment member 102 is rotated, the bottom plate 106 moves along the valve body 108, toward or away from the top plate 104 depending on which direction the member 102 is turned.

[15] The top plate 104 has an opening 110 that can accommodate both the valve body 108 and the adjustment member 102. In one embodiment, the valve body 108 has a groove 112 and the opening 110 in the top plate 104 is designed so that the top plate 104 can fit over the

end of the valve body 108 and be twisted to engage with the groove 112 while leaving the tool mating surface 107 accessible. The engagement between the top plate 104 and the valve body 108 ensures that they will move together if the adjustment member 102 is turned while the bottom plate 106 is fixed in a deck.

[16] In one embodiment, the assembly 100 may have two adjustment members 102, one on each side of the valve body 108. When one adjustment member 102 is tightened, the movement of the adjustment member 102 being turned pulls the bottom plate 106 and top plate 104 closer together. The relative movement of the top and bottom plates 104, 106 also will tend to push the other, stationary adjustment member 102 upward as well and make it protrude above the surface of the deck. At this point, the bottom plate 106 will be unevenly loaded because the adjustment members 102 are not turned the same amount. The installer can then turn the protruding adjustment member 102 until both members 102 are tightened substantially the same amount, balancing the load applied to the bottom plate 106.

[17] Further, the valve body 102 may have an outer perimeter configuration that prevents relative rotational movement. In one embodiment, the outer surface of the valve body 102 has both straight and curved portions, such as a double-D shape as shown in Figures 1 through 3. The top and/or bottom plates 104, 106 may have openings that accommodate the double-D cross-section as well. The double-D configuration prevents the valve body 108 from twisting relative to the plates 104, 106 and ensures that the plates 104, 106 and valve body 108 only move linearly when the adjustment member 102 is turned. Other configurations that prevent the valve body 108 from rotating out of alignment during tightening may also be incorporated; the key is to restrict relative movement of the top plate 104, bottom plate 106, and valve body 108 to linear movement when the adjustment member 102 is turned.

[18] Figures 2 and 3 illustrate two possible installations of the inventive valve assembly 100. Regardless of the specific installment type, a properly installed valve assembly 100 will have the bottom plate 106 firmly against an underside of a deck. Similarly, the top plate 104 is should firmly against a top surface of the deck when the assembly 100 is properly installed. Over time, the valve assembly 100 components may loosen, warranting tightening after installation. The specific movement of the assembly components when the adjustment member 102 is turned depends on how the assembly 100 is installed in the deck.

[19] Figure 2 illustrates a conventional installation where the assembly 100 is installed in, for example, an integral tub ledge. As shown in the Figure, the integral tub ledge forms a deck 200 having a single layer. The deck 200 has a top surface 202, a bottom surface 204, and a mounting hole 206 that can accommodate the valve body 108.

[20] To attach the assembly 100 to the deck 200, the top plate 104 is first removed and the valve body 108 is inserted through the mounting hole 206 from the bottom of the deck 200. The top plate 104 is then replaced over the top of the valve body 108 and twisted into the groove 108 on the valve body 108. At this point, the top plate 104 rests on the top surface 202 of the deck 202. The bottom plate 106, however, is below the bottom surface 204 of the deck, causing the valve assembly 100 to still be loose in the deck 200.

[21] When a tool, such as a screwdriver 210, engages with the tool mating portion 107 of the adjustment member 102 and is turned, the adjustment member 102 moves the bottom plate 106 relative to the valve body 108, pulling the bottom plate 106 and top plate 104 closer together. Because the top plate 104 position is fixed against the top surface of the deck 202 in this case, turning the adjustment member 102 pulls the bottom plate 106, as shown by arrow A in Figure 2. An installer would continue turning the adjustment member 102 until the bottom plate 106 rests firmly against the bottom surface of the deck 204. Note that although the adjustment is conducted above the deck 200, the adjustment moves a component (i.e., the bottom plate 106) disposed underneath the deck 200. Because the adjustment member 102 is still accessible after the valve assembly 100 is installed, the assembly 100 can be easily retightened if needed.

[22] The same valve assembly 100 may also be used in a customized installation, as shown in Figure 3. A deck 300 for a customized installation normally has a plywood base 302 with underlayment 304, mortar 306 and tile 308 built on top of the base 302. The tile layer 308 provides the top surface 310 of the deck 300.

[23] In a customized installation, the valve assembly 100 is left intact. The bottom plate 106 is attached to the plywood base 302 with wood screws 312. The underlayment 304, mortar 306, and tile 308 are then built up around the valve assembly 100, surrounding the bottom plate 106 and fixing the bottom plate 106 firmly inside the deck 300. A guide, such as a cardboard shim (not shown), may be placed underneath the top plate 106 to indicate a desired thickness for the combined underlayment 304, mortar 306 and tile layers 308. The top

plate 104 itself may also act as a guide indicating a maximum tile thickness and/or a minimum tile exposure.

[24] Once the mortar 306 has hardened, the adjustment members 102 may be turned as explained above to tighten the assembly 100. If a guide was used, the top plate 104 may be removed to allow removal of the guide and then reinstalled to the valve body 108 before tightening. In this case, turning the adjustment member 102 will cause the top plate 104 and the valve body 108 to move downward toward the bottom plate 106 in the direction shown by arrow B. The bottom plate 106 is unable to move in this case because it is fixed inside the deck 300; therefore, turning the adjustment member 102 forces the top plate 104 and valve body 108 to move downward instead of moving the bottom plate 106 upward. The installer preferably continues turning the adjustment member 102 until the top plate 104 rests firmly against the top surface 310 of the deck. As in the example shown in Figure 2, the adjustment member 102 remains accessible from the top of the deck 300 even though the remainder of the valve assembly 100 is embedded in the deck 300, making easy tightening of the assembly 100 possible after installation.

[25] Regardless of the specific way the valve assembly 100 is installed, the relative movement between the valve body 108, the top plate 104 and the bottom plate 106 is the same when the adjustment member 102 is turned. The only change is the component(s) that actually moves, which is dictated by how the assembly 100 is installed and which component is fixed to the deck and thereby rendered immobile. Because the adjustment member 102

[26] As a result, the inventive structure allows valve adjustment and tightening without requiring access to the bottom portion of the valve assembly. Instead, the inventive structure allows deck-mounted valve assemblies to be tightened completely from above the deck, eliminating valve access issues as well as concerns about tool clearance issues normally encountered in assemblies requiring bottom access. Further, in one embodiment of the invention, the adjustment member is designed to accommodate using conventional tools rather than specialized tools that can be lost or misplaced. The variable distance between the bottom and top plates also allow the inventive valve assembly to be used in both conventional and customized installations.

[27] It should be understood that various alternatives to the embodiments of the invention described herein may be employed in practicing the invention. It is intended that the

following claims define the scope of the invention and that the method and apparatus within the scope of these claims and their equivalents be covered thereby.